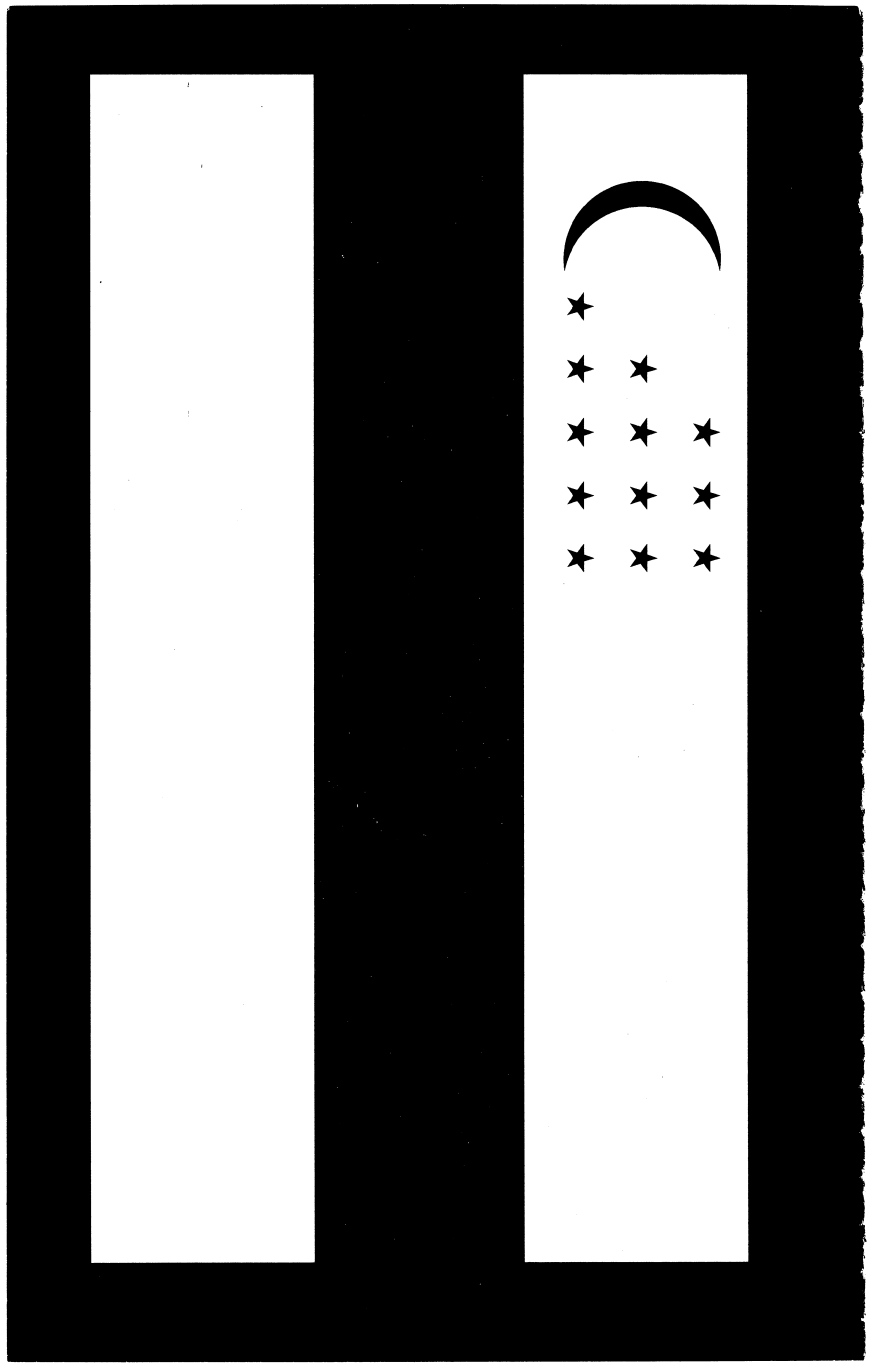


Hassan Kurbanbaev (HK)

Hassan Kurbanbaev is a Tashkent, Uzbekistan-based photographer. Throughout his practice, he explores both the complex history and evolving present of his country through vast landscapes, intimate portraits, and poetic still lifes. In one particular body of work, *Logomania: Owning The World at Half Price*, 2019–2020, Kurbanbaev documents bootleg fashion in Uzbekistan via raw in situ video and high-gloss studio photography. The series of photographs calls into question what happens when logos move across cultures, the creative potential of Chanel head scarves, and what it means for Uzbekistan to be labeled a "bootleg country." Interview by Ben Schwartz (BS).

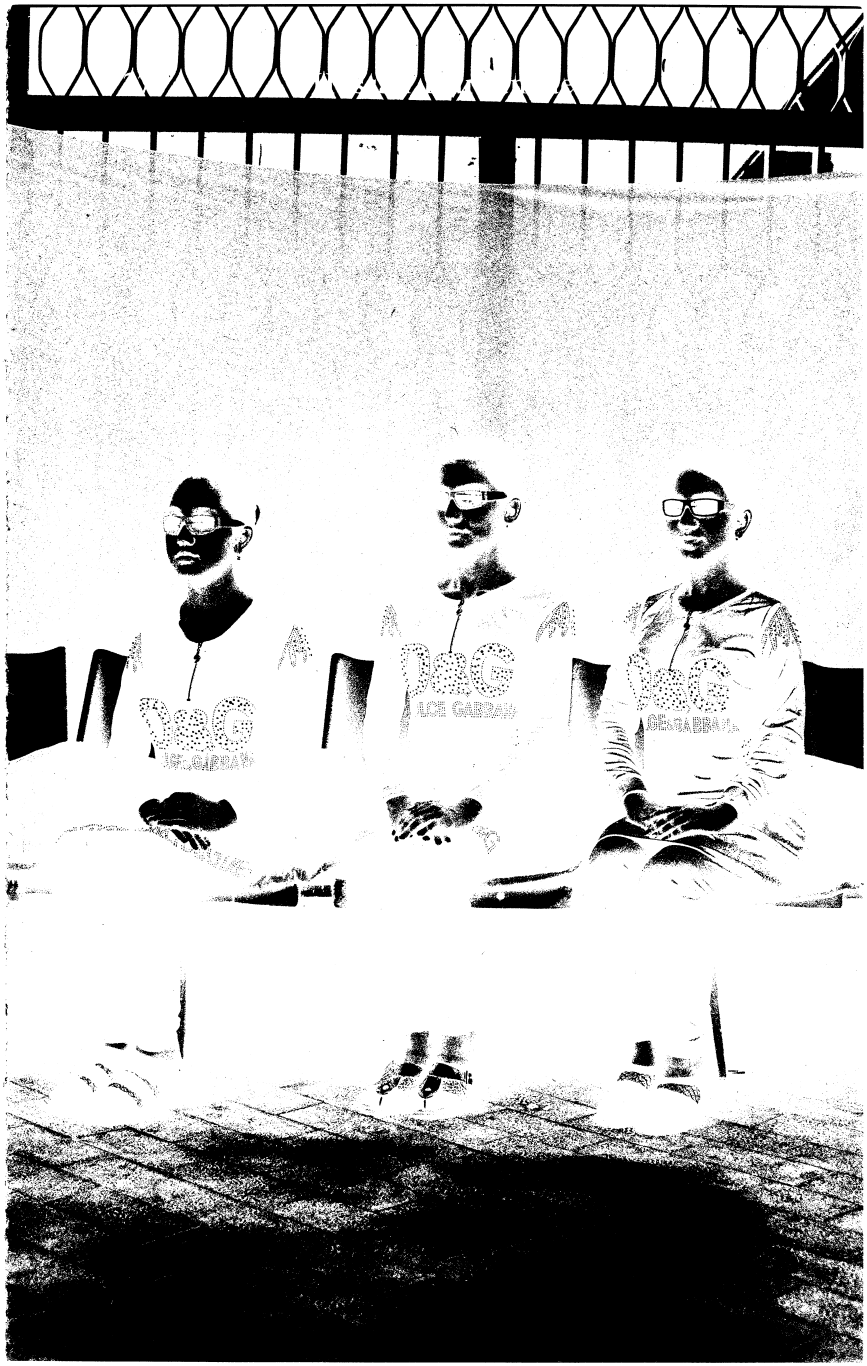
> BS: In a statement for the 2020 exhibition 'The Real Thing', you wrote, "In a way, Uzbekistan is a bootleg country." Could you elaborate on that? How might the history of Uzbekistan relate to the bootleg obsession that you are documenting today?

HK: It was a figurative expression. I spoke about this in the context of borrowing signs from Western culture since Uzbekistan gained independence after the

fall of the USSR. People were so happy about this freedom—from a protracted, wild shortage of goods, we jumped into the hands of the mass market, which began to overwhelm the country, and this was a joy for that time. Just imagine that in the 1990s, a plastic bag with a picture or some kind of logo was something valuable to people, it was stored and even washed. And therefore, for that time, any Western symbol, like Adidas or McDonald's, printed on something—mainly on clothes—was perceived as something important, something that could make you happier. The West opened before us in all its attractive splendor. Of course, huge quantities of poor-quality goods and bootlegs poured into the country, and this could no longer be stopped. A fake West came to us, made somewhere in China, Turkey, and Eastern Europe. Along with the goods came television, which also began to form new values and the desire for wealth, or at least for prosperity. It was a new consumer experience that was firmly embedded in our lives. A lot of time has passed since then, but this mania has remained as before. It seems to me that it only grows over the years; we see the West everywhere (and more recently, the rich Middle East) and we want to immortalize our current architecture, the decoration of our homes, and the clothes that can imitate that luxury and wealth.

BS: In the West, logos like Gucci or Apple symbolize a certain class or sign of quality. What additional meaning do these symbols take on in the context of Uzbekistan?

p. 279: Hassan Kurbanbaev, Image from the series *Logomania: Owning The World at Half Price*, 2019–2020 (2020)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HK: This is a good question, and one I think about myself. Of course, they have the same meanings, but are perceived differently. Because they are replicated on anything, including store signs or bed linen, for example, the logos themselves are depreciated and become something of a household name. The specific logo does not matter anymore, its presence is more important. This, as I said in the project statement, is the "naive method of appropriation."

> BS: Are you critical of this brand obsession and the impact it might have on developing Uzbekistan's own unique cultural identity? Or do you embrace this obsession as symbolic of our globalized capitalistic culture?

HK: In this obsession, I see a kind of crisis in our current culture. It is difficult for me to understand what played the first role here: demand—that is, the need of a local person to be covered with Western logotype—or supply—when manufacturers located somewhere in China or Turkey formed an opinion that having a fashion brand logotype is something that will enrich your clothes, and yourself. I tend towards the latter. This is a billion-dollar consumer goods business, which, together with globalization and approximately the same worldwide ideas about luxury, moves around the planet and has destructive properties for different emerging cultures.

> BS: I wonder if you see any creative potential in this obsession with bootlegs. Could

p. 280: Hassan Kurbanbaev, Image from the series *Logomania: Owning The World at Half Price*, 2019–2020 (2020)

> they be objects of inspiration? Could they evolve into a unique visual style of their own as they interact, blend, and integrate with more traditional elements of Uzbekistan culture?

HK: I would not make this photo series if it was only about bootlegs. It is not interesting to me. Once walking through the local bazaars, when I saw a thousand golden logotypes on long Muslim robes, I said, "wow, this can be a story." Therefore, as a photographer, it is interesting for me to observe this interaction. This is unique and authentic. Take, for example, women's headscarves, which most often have Chanel logos, or local grandmother's Muslim velour suits with a Gucci logotype on it. This combination of fashion, religion, West and East, and the economy has a strong visual narrative and is a good field for creativity.

> BS: Could you talk about the images themselves? The photographs are stunning, sumptuous, and glamorous. They are often shot in-studio, beautifully styled, and carefully composed. For you, what do these formal qualities communicate as opposed to, for example, more in-situ street photographs where bootlegs naturally occur?

HK: As soon as the idea for this series was born, I decided that I wanted to present it as something like family archives or vintage photography postcards. I wanted to elevate the costumes in the same way seeing something in the context of a museum immediately signifies values. In addition, there is a social or

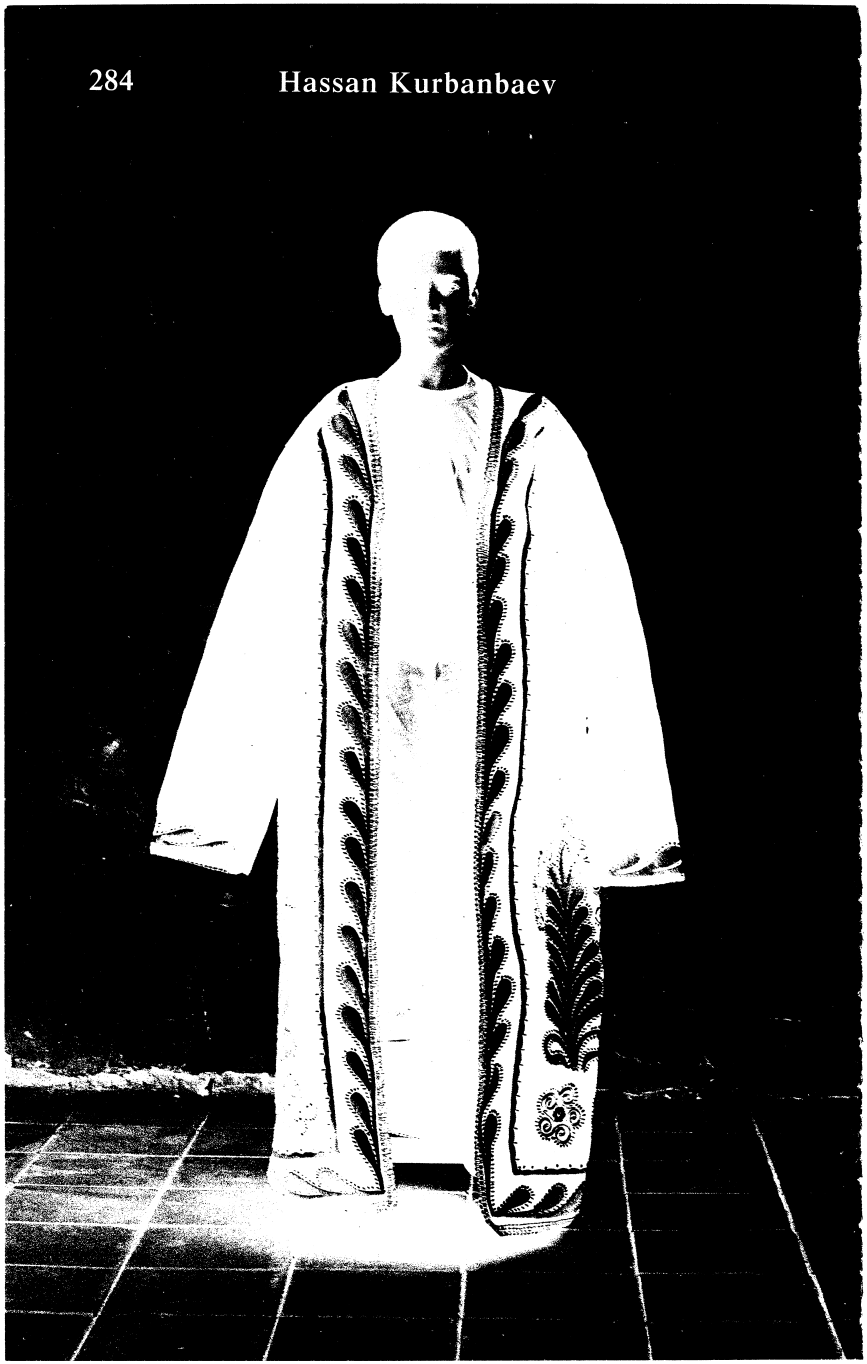
cultural subtext in the photographs. Take, for example, a woman in a dressing gown with an embroidery of the Prada Milano crest: she is holding a rose, but also in her hand is her usual broom with which she sweeps the yard. Much is taken from my real-life observations.

> BS: Do you see potential in your photographs as they circulate, to insert Uzbekistan culture into a broader global narrative?

HK: Absolutely. Unfortunately, Uzbekistan is still a country that does not have a clear reference for the Western audience; it is generally very difficult for them to understand what Uzbekistan is. Therefore, I am looking for ideas that can reflect the modern life of my country. And if in the gallery my photos can work in, say, the context of a certain topic or research, then on Instagram this is my personal opportunity to reach a large audience; talk about my country through personal experience; enter into a dialogue with different opinions, positive and negative; and communicate with people who have never been to my country, as well as with Uzbek diasporas living in Europe or the USA.

> BS: On your website you mention the slogan of Uzbekistan, "A country with a great past and a great future." As the bootleg phenomenon seems so rooted in our present, I wonder what you think it might communicate about Uzbekistan culture today?

HK: It should be noted that the bootleg appeared in Uzbekistan before the original. It came first. Hence,



it initially had superiority in our so-called present. There is a feeling that this was reflected in the country itself, in its image. In our life, there is a lot of parody and absurdity, imitation. We strive very much for a beautiful future, while not developing our own modern culture.

p. 284: Hassan Kurbanbaev, Image from the series *Logomania: Owning The World at Half Price*, 2019–2020 (2020)
Title page (p. 276): Flag of Uzbekistan